

the Federal employees health benefit plan must agree to provide drug coverage for Federal retirees actuarially equivalent to the drug coverage they provide to current Federal employees. In other words, what that means is that when Members of Congress and other Federal employees retire, they will not be forced to go into H.R. 1, into the Republican Medicare bill. It is good for Members of Congress, it is good for Federal employees, because the Republican Medicare drug benefit would be a step down for them. Remember what the President said: If it is good enough for Members of Congress, it is good enough for seniors in this Nation. That is what he says about the Republican bill.

It would be a big step down to go into the Republican privatized drug benefit plan for the 13 million American private sector retirees who get drug coverage through their employers' health insurance. The Congressional Budget Office said that more than one-third of all seniors who are in private retirement plans will see their plans dropped by their employer. They will be forced out of the private coverage they have today, forced out of that plan and put into the inferior Republican Medicare prescription drug plan.

H.R. 2631 says Members of Congress should not have to live under the same system that the Republican Medicare plan foists on the American public. Should we pass H.R. 2631 today? Absolutely, because 8.5 million Federal employees should not have to live with the Republican Medicare bill's drug benefit. But given that the Republican Medicare bill's drug benefit is so bad that Congress, after passing it 2 weeks ago, today is exempting themselves, get that again, the Republican Medicare bill is so bad from 2 weeks ago that passed here that today Congress is exempting itself from that plan so that Members of Congress can continue to enjoy good health coverage, not the inferior plan that President Bush and Republicans are foisting on Congress.

We should pass H.R. 2631 today and we should throw H.R. 1 in the shredder and get to work on a real prescription drug benefit for American seniors. And the President when he says, "If it's good enough for Congress, it's good enough for seniors in this Nation," the President should mean what he says.

#### BETTER TEACHERS MAKE BETTER EDUCATION

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Pursuant to the order of the House of January 7, 2003, the gentleman from Texas (Mr. DELAY) is recognized during morning hour debates.

Mr. DELAY. Mr. Speaker, following President Bush's landmark No Child Left Behind law, we now have an opportunity to make overdue reforms in the Federal Government's role in our national education system. We will take up two very important education reauthorization bills this week to begin

that process. The first is the Ready to Teach Act of 2003 sponsored by the gentleman from Georgia (Mr. GINGREY) which will strengthen and improve teacher training programs all around this country. With the enormous responsibilities weighing on them today, we owe it not only to American teachers but to their students to prepare every one of them before they set foot in the classroom. Highly qualified teachers, as all of us know and some of us were lucky enough to have in school, are worth their weight in gold. But too many inexperienced teachers are being thrown into the classroom without effective training and preparation. This legislation will start measuring training programs' success and holding them accountable. It will bring higher qualified individuals into the training programs and ultimately into the classrooms. It is an important first step in reshaping American education to face the emerging challenges of the 21st century.

Equally important is the bill of the gentleman from South Carolina (Mr. WILSON), the Teacher Recruitment and Retention Act. Under this bill, qualified teachers in math, science and special education would be eligible for student loan forgiveness of up to \$17,500 if they teach in low-income community schools. Most of these poor title I schools are in our Nation's inner cities and in our rural areas where the need for qualified teachers is most acute. Too many math and science classes are being taught by teachers who neither majored nor minored in those fields. And two-thirds of public schools around the country have teacher vacancies in their special education programs.

Mr. Speaker, as more and more of our best teachers retire every year, the teaching shortage in America is approaching crisis levels and we must act. We have to develop innovative ways to attract and retain the highest quality individuals we can for our schools, to get results for students, parents and teachers around the country. And while these two bills are only part of a broader agenda, both of them start to do just that.

#### RECOGNIZING 30TH ANNIVERSARY OF CARICOM

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Pursuant to the order of the House of January 7, 2003, the gentlewoman from the Virgin Islands (Mrs. CHRISTENSEN) is recognized during morning hour debates for 5 minutes.

Mrs. CHRISTENSEN. Mr. Speaker, I rise this morning to recognize the 30th anniversary of CARICOM which was celebrated on July 4 of this year. Founded in 1973 in Chaguaramas, Trinidad, CARICOM, or its full name, the Caribbean Community, now includes 16 members. I want to congratulate CARICOM's outgoing chair, Prime Minister Pierre Charles of Dominica, and the incoming chair, the Honorable P.J.

Patterson of Jamaica, on behalf of the people of the U.S. Virgin Islands, the Congressional Black Caucus, and the Congress of the United States. We in the Virgin Islands and the CBC pledge our continued support as they meet the challenges presented by new global and regional trade alliances and loss of preferences, HIV/AIDS and the other social and economic needs of their constituencies, governance, the need for regionalization and the difficult relationship with us, their northern neighbor.

I particularly want to recognize the historic participation of the Honorable Thabo Mbeki, President of South Africa, in the recent 24th regular meeting of the conference of CARICOM heads of government in Montego Bay, Jamaica. His presence significantly underscores the connectedness of all people of African descent and the sameness of our struggles no matter whether on the continent of Africa or in the diaspora. As we are linked by blood and history, so is our future tied together.

Mr. Speaker, the Caribbean community also shares important historical ties with this Nation and today represents not only an important trading partner with the balance in our favor but also a critical partner in our fight against drugs in our own country and our important efforts to ensure our homeland security. With this background and the need for closer cooperation, the recent interactions of our country at the 24th heads of government meetings held during the anniversary celebration do not make sense to me.

First, although the presence of U.S. Trade Representative Robert Zoellick was important to discussions of the impact of the upcoming FTAA agreement, the refusal to support what I consider to be standard transitioning for these smaller countries in the face of the loss of important preferences which have been the bulwark of their economic stability is not the action of a friend and neighbor. I hope that the administration will reconsider its position. Secondly, there was discussion on the International Criminal Court. While there may be differing opinions as to whether the United States should be given a waiver from liability under this court, it is unconscionable in my view for us to strong arm the Caribbean countries into supporting the waiver by threatening to cut off financial aid which has been previously committed and on which they are depending. With friends like us, the CARICOM nations do not need enemies.

This is not the first instance in which this country has sought to force its will by employing or threatening punitive measures that these nations can ill afford. The CARICOM countries are to be commended, however, for not surrendering their national integrity in the face of our bullying. But there has to be a better way. I want to use this time, Mr. Speaker, to call on the administration to seek that better way